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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 13, 2005

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SECRETARY HERZFELDER ANNOUNCES
REFORM OF STATE'S LAND & FOREST CONSERVATION SERVICES
Division of Conservation Services to Merge with Office of Land and Forest Policy

Massachusetts Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Roy Herzfelder today announced the reform of the state's land and forest conservation services with the consolidation of the Division of Conservation Services and the Office of Land and Forest Policy into the new Office of Land and Forest Conservation Services. This new office will allow the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) to strengthen its land conservation and protection tools and better coordinate activities and initiatives underway to develop land and forest policy.

The new Office of Land and Forest Conservation Services will be overseen by Robert O'Connor who has most recently served as the Director of the Land and Forest Policy Office and has overseen programs such as the Massachusetts Watershed Initiative and natural resource protection initiatives for the four watersheds that serve the Boston Metropolitan area. In addition, Irene DelBono, the former Director of Land Acquisition for the Department of Environmental Management (now the Department of Conservation and Recreation) will be brought on as Regional Planner. Ms. DelBono has a wealth of experience in land conservation and conservation restrictions and will have the primary responsibility of reviewing Chapter 184 Conservation Restrictions. With Ms. DelBono joining the office of Land and Forest Conservation Services, there will be a combined staff of seven dedicated to ensuring effective coordination and development of land and forest policy and protection activities across EOEA's agencies.

"We have worked with many stakeholders to develop a plan for the new Office of Land and Forest Conservation Services that will better enable it to fulfill its two critical missions – focusing land protection efforts on the most important habitat, farms, forests, water supply lands and outdoor recreation sites and fostering the highest standards of forest management for Massachusetts' three million acres of forests," said Secretary Ellen Roy Herzfelder. "I am excited to appoint Bob O'Connor as the new Director. He is a qualified professional with the background, education, and experience necessary to streamline and strengthen the Commonwealth's conservation services and land and forest policy development activities."

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Jennifer Soper has been the Acting Director of the Division of Conservation Services. She has worked closely with land trusts and municipal partners during the last eight months to review Conservation Restrictions. Ms. Soper will assume the role of Director of Grants for Conservation Services when the merger takes effect on June 15, 2005.

During the past year, the Division of Conservation Services has awarded more than 40 grants for communities to purchase open space and to renovate and build new parks. The Division has also reviewed over 150 conservation restrictions to assure that these documents permanently protect open space and provide a significant public benefit. Massachusetts is the only state that mandates the review and approval of conservation restrictions by the state, which strengthens conservation tools and assures that important natural resources are protected. Conservation Services also assists communities in completing open space plans and coordinates the fourteen Conservation Districts across the state that provide grassroots conservation assistance to landowners, communities and non-profits.

The Office of Land and Forest Policy has been responsible for coordinating Secretary Herzfelder's "Strategic Land Conservation" initiative focusing land protection efforts on the most critical habitat, working farms and forests, water supply lands and outdoor recreation sites. Part of this initiative has been the launch of several new conservation tools that offer incentives for many of the more than 300,000 persons who own larger tracts of undeveloped land. These incentives include Forest Stewardship – a program that reached 16,000 persons owning 700,000 acres of forest and completed forest management plans and 10-year no-development commitments on over 40,000 acres of prime forest land. Also new this year was the state's first grant program to non-profit land trusts – issuing 7 grants for the protection of significant open space at a great value to the Commonwealth. The Office of Land and Forest Policy also coordinates land acquisition activities of the three EOEA agencies – Agriculture, Fish and Game and the Department of Conservation and Recreation – that completed over 75 land acquisition projects across the state this fiscal year.

By combining the expertise of these two offices, EOEA will further improve land and forest conservation and fully implement its Strategic Land Conservation initiative.

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